

## Pain Management Service

### Managing Activity

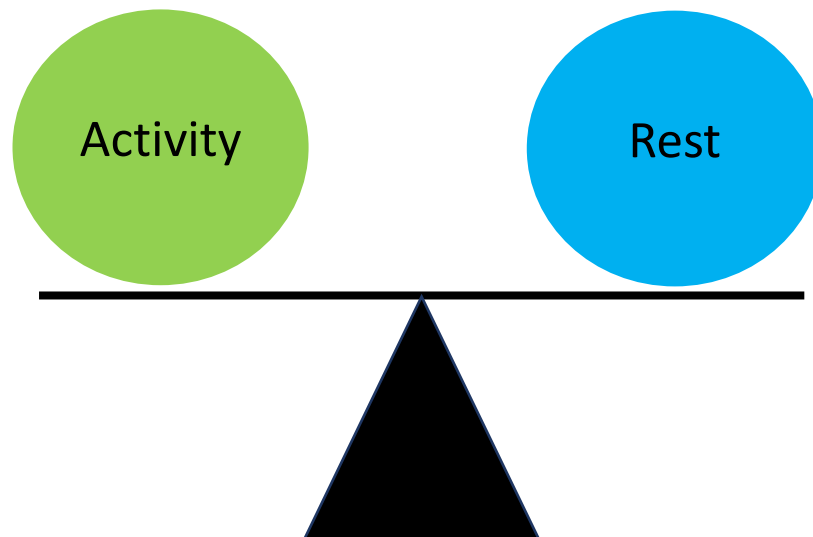
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## Aim

This information sheet aims to help increase your understanding of how activity levels can impact the pain system, and how to begin managing your own personal activity levels in a way that helps you to achieve more without worsening your pain in the long term.

### Topics covered:

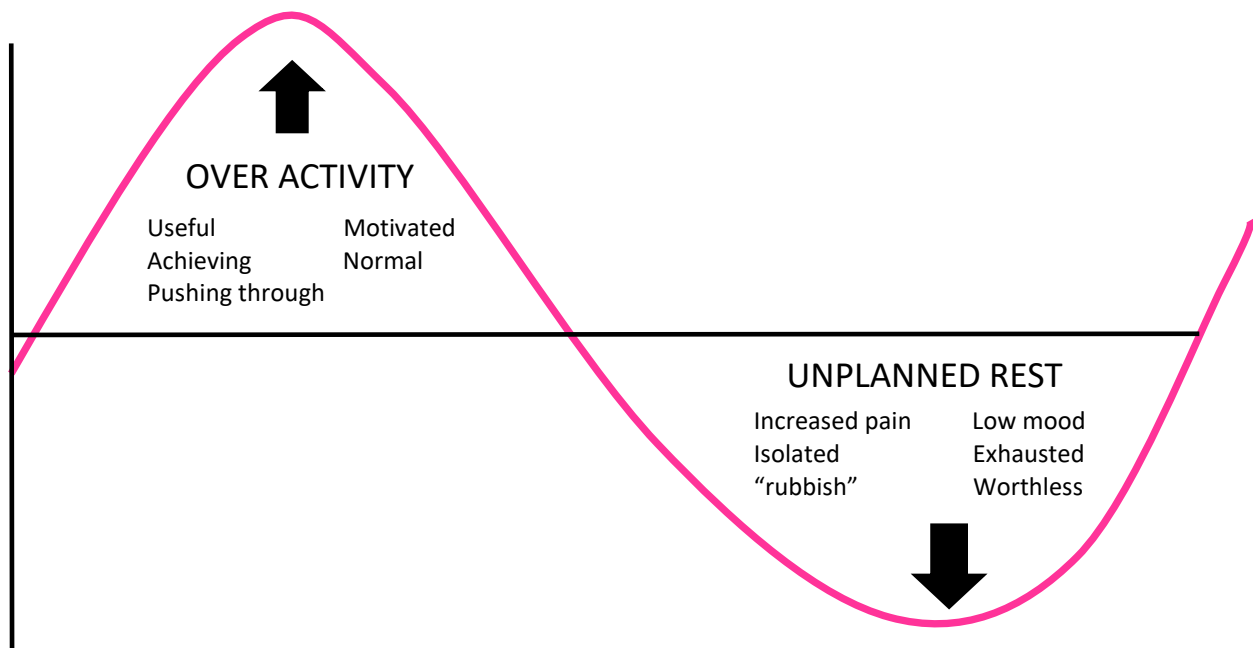
- Common activity patterns in Chronic Pain
- How activity patterns affect our pain system
- What is pacing?
- Planning activity – baselines
- Planning activity – prioritising
- What is rest?
- Common barriers



## Common activity patterns

For some people with Chronic Pain, they can find themselves getting stuck in patterns of activity.

Sometimes this is doing a lot when it feels okay to do so, and then feeling worse in energy and pain afterwards – this is known as Boom & Bust.



For others, it might be that the demands of everyday life mean you feel the need to push through the pain often. Pushing through in this way means that while you are doing the things you need to, it is likely that you don't get much of a break from the pain, and your energy levels may be low a lot of the time.

On the other hand, sometimes when pain has had a big impact on lots of different areas of life, it can make us hesitant to do the things we used to. This means that sometimes you might choose not to do the activity you would like to due to fear of how your body might respond. While this means that you are not making the pain worse in the moment, you maybe miss out on things you would like to do.

All of these patterns are common in Chronic Pain and both over-activity and under-activity, have a further impact on your pain system.

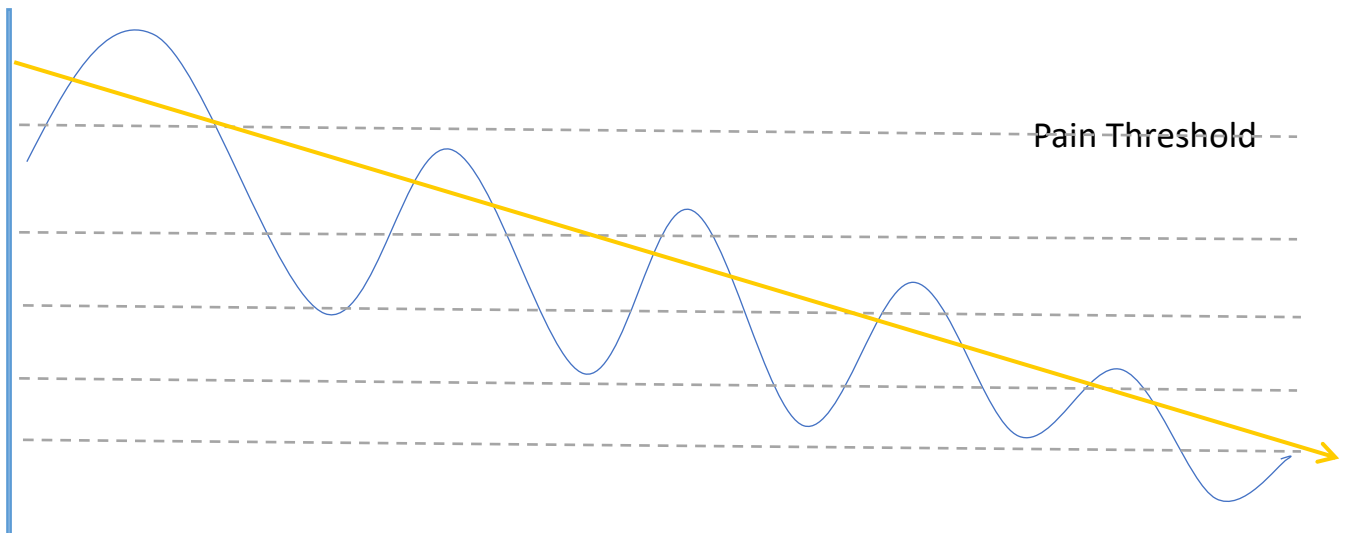
Do you recognise any of these in your own experience?

## Impact of activity on the pain system

### Over Activity:

The graph below shows that each time we push through our 'pain threshold' our pain system becomes more sensitive. This means that the next time we try to do the same activity, pain may come on sooner than it did before. Over time, the more often we push through pain, the more sensitive our system becomes, which means it will send pain signals with less activity.

This is what can happen when a boom and busy pattern happens a lot, or when pain is pushed through often.



### Under Activity:

When we are under-active, whilst the pain system is triggered less often, our bodies become less fit. This means the cardiovascular system is less fit, and muscles and ligaments are not kept strong. This process is called de-conditioning and can make it physically harder when you do try to do activity because your body is not fit enough to do what it used to.

So, both over- and under- activity can have a negative impact on the body and pain system. Finding a balance between the two, a balance between activity and rest is needed.

## Why Pacing?

Our goal is to ‘fly under the radar’. That means doing just enough activity that we can still achieve tasks, but not push through the pain threshold. Research shows that over time, this way of managing activity levels can let our pain system increase the pain threshold again. It also helps to plan each day, with less uncertainty about what might be manageable.

### Benefits of Pacing

- Helps prevent the pain system becoming more sensitive
- You control actions, not pain
- Can allow gradual build up of activity
- Planned movement keeps our bodies and minds healthy

### Where to start: Baselines

- The **starting point** for pacing
- The level you can manage **on a bad day**
- Different for **different** activities
- Choose **how to measure**: time distance repetitions
- **Realistic**, not based on what you “used” to be able to do
- **Experiment** to find where to start

On the next page is a sheet to help try estimate your baseline level for different activities. It can be helpful to choose two or three activities that you value, things that you would like to be doing and work out where your baseline is right now. If you estimate it wrong and do too much, that’s okay, we all make mistakes while trying something new. Next time reduce the level and see how that feels instead.

Baseline estimation sheet

<b>Activity</b>	<b>How to measure</b> <i>(time, distance, repetitions)</i>	<b>Estimated current baseline</b> <i>How much can I do comfortably?</i>	<b>Test it out – was this about right? Do I need to adjust it?</b>

## How to Pace: Planning

### Choose your activity

- What is the activity you want to do?
- What is involved? Think about all the steps e.g. getting ready, travel, organising.
- Compare this to your baseline

### Break it up

- If the activity is more than your baseline – break it down into smaller chunks
- Plan what to do in between the chunks – rest or switch the type of activity

### Plan ahead

- Are others involved? Tell them your how much you plan on doing.
- Can anyone help? What could they do to make it more manageable for you?
- Do you need to do this activity? Can you delegate it?
- Prioritise – if this is a valued activity for you today, prioritise your energy here and ditch or delegate other activities as best you can

## What is rest?

There's a difference between planned and unplanned rest. Unplanned rest is what happens when we have fallen into a Boom and Bust cycle, or pushed through pain. The problem with unplanned rest is that our body needs far more when it has reached this point, and often we feel bad about ourselves for needing it when there are other things we would like to be doing.

Planned rest on the other hand, is scheduled just like any other important activity in the day would be, it has its own purpose. It can still be hard to give yourself permission to do this, but in the long run it allows for more productivity because our body doesn't have such a crash after pushing through the pain. It allows us to have small doses of restorative rest – these are often a rest for both brain and body.

### Examples of planned rest include:

- a breathing exercise
- gentle movement e.g. Yoga or tai chi
- a cup of tea
- reading a book
- practicing mindfulness

## What helps me rest?

You can use the space below to note down anything that helps you feel calm, soothed, relaxed or rested. This can be activities e.g. stretching, items e.g. a cup of tea, or environments e.g. your favourite chair. Try to come up with as many as you can, it doesn't matter if they seem far-fetched right now. Can you try them out and evaluate if they work and how well?

Thinking about how easy they are and when it works can help you plan which ideas might be best to use at different times.

<b>Restful activity</b>	<b>What do I need for this?</b>	<b>How easy is it to do?</b>	<b>How well does it work?</b>
<i>e.g. gentle stretching</i>	<i>Space on the floor &amp; a cushion</i>	<i>Easy unless I'm having a flare up</i>	<i>Usually well – I feel calmer after</i>



## Common Barriers to Pacing

### Physical Barriers:

- Flare ups - a flare up takes pain beyond its usual level and therefore even baseline activity may not be possible. Our webinar on flare-ups includes a section on planning for managing flare-ups.
- Non-valued activity – spending energy on activities that you don't need to do, or that don't bring value to you means you have less reserve to do the more important activities.
- Good days – on days that your pain feels okay or manageable it's tempting to do a lot to make up for bad days. It's hard to give yourself permission and stop before pain increases to stay within your baseline.
- Using pain as a guide – if you wait until pain increases to stop then you have gone through your pain threshold. Using pain to guide action can also be variable and mean it's harder to find a consistent level of activity you can plan for.

### Psychological Barriers:

- Setting an unrealistic baseline - it's hard to admit perhaps how little you can do in comparison to where you'd like to be. Fighting through the pain often leads to having to stop or give up. This makes you feel like you are even further from your goals than before.
- Comparing yourself to what you used to be able to do – this can make us feel low, hopeless, angry, stressed and frustrated, all of which use more energy and can increase pain, making it even harder to do what you plan.
- Increasing activity too quickly – it's great to be motivated but wanting to rush the process of gradually increasing activity often leads back to a boom and bust pattern.
- Fear of pain – when the memory and experience of pain is strong it can be enough to stop us from trying out even our lower levels of activity. It's hard to keep in mind that pain does not mean new damage is occurring.
- Stress – as humans when we're stressed we find ways to try and fix it. That often means actively doing things to solve our problems. Finding other ways to relieve some of that stress, and taking breaks, will allow you to be more productive in the time you choose to do the things you need to.

### Social Barriers:

- Family – you may have commitments to family, such as young children, whose needs cannot be postponed or delegated.
- Work – for people who work, often the demands of work are difficult to fit into a pacing framework. Or, colleagues may not understand why you need to approach your workload differently.
- Saying no – it can be hard to say no to activities we know we can't manage at the moment or that will take us away from activity that we need or want to do.

## Useful tips



## Frequently Asked Questions

### ***What if I do too much?***

That's okay. We all make mistakes when trying to learn new ways of approaching difficulties. Make a note of what you have done and how you can try to do it differently next time. That might be doing less, breaking it into smaller chunks or doing it differently.

### ***What if I don't have a choice in how much activity I do? Work, children, other essential commitments are not negotiable.***

Unfortunately there are some elements of our lives that we aren't able to have full control over. It can be helpful to try and communicate your needs to others (friends, family, work), who might make adjustments. If not, try to manage the activities that mean the most to you and plan ahead how much you have to do each day. Pace where you can and monitor the effect that it has.

### ***I nap or go to sleep to rest – is that bad?***

Sometimes when our body is exhausted it needs more sleep, this is often unplanned. Pacing hopes to manage your pain so that you do not need to take unplanned rest. Good quality rest does not mean sleep, it is a way of feeling calm, connected, soothed and rested. Often other activities, other than sleep, can help us feel this way.

### ***My to-do list is just going to get bigger if I take more rest***

Research shows us that we are actually more productive when we take regular breaks for our body and mind.

## Useful Resources on managing activity

The Pain Toolkit includes lots of information about Chronic Pain. Within the 'tools' section there are further videos on pacing and rest.

<https://www.paintoolkit.org/pain-tools>

A step by step guide to pacing and goal setting can be found here:

<https://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au/pain-module/pacing-and-goal-setting/>

Versus Arthritis have various information leaflets and links to exercise for people with arthritis:

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/>